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ABSTRACT

A study examined how well existing audience theory fits what really happens when writers write on the job. This ethnographic study focused on the process of revising one chapter from a guide to the DOS computer operating system designed for use by novices as well as intermediate and skilled users. Preliminary findings confirmed much of audience theory, but with some qualifications. Preliminary findings indicated that, as audience theory predicted, the publisher classified its readers by skill and by professional background and that the audience for this chapter included people within the company. Implications of this study are that audience constraints on the job are more complicated than technical writing textbooks admit, and that, in industry, editors of computer documentation need more immediate and more salient information about their external audiences. (Two figures are included.) (RS)

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WRITING FOR MULTIPLE AUDIENCES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Mark D. Simpson

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years researchers have begun to look at writing in the workplace from a "social point of view" (Faigley 1985). This perspective means that researchers examine the "relationships between the process of composing and the knowledge, values, and experiences that writers share with others in their office" (Odell 1985). An important dimension of this composing process is audience--how writers think about their audiences and how those audiences affect the production of documents.

One question that naturally arises is how well existing audience theory fits what really happens when writers write on the job. That's a question that I have investigated in a recent ethnographic study of how writers and editors shape computer documentation for multiple audiences.

In my talk today, I would like to present two preliminary findings from my research and explain how these findings match what is predicted by audience theory. First, however, let me say a few words about the methods I used in my research.

METHODS

The setting I studied was a midwest publishing firm--which I will call the MicroBook Company--that specializes in computer books. I acted as both participant and observer: for three months I worked on site as an editor for the company while I also conducted research. Then for several months afterwards I continued my research in the company, returning every few weeks to complete interviews or attend meetings. During my research I collected field notes; conducted interviews with management, editors, and authors; and analyzed company documents, such as memos, style guides, and book manuscripts in various stages of preparation.

I focused my research on one chapter from one of the company's books. I traced the production of the book's second edition, and even participated in the editing of the book, although I did not edit the chapter I chose to examine. The particular book, a guide to the DOS operating system for IBM computers, is what MicroBook calls a cradle-to-grave book; it was meant to cover everything about DOS for everybody. In other words, it provided an interesting rhetorical situation for study. From a profit-and-loss standpoint the book was successful. It had consistently placed among the top selling computer books, according to industry sources.

The findings from the study confirm much of audience theory, but with some qualifications. At this point I would like to explain the first of two conclusions or perspectives from audience theory and compare it to a finding from my research.

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THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: AUDIENCE CLASSIFICATIONS

The first perspective on audience is a way of thinking about multiple audiences and might be termed the taxonomy approach. The taxonomy approach classifies audience types according to various principles. One example of this is Aristotle's three-part classification of audiences according to their age: Young Men, Elderly Men, and Men in their Prime, each having characteristics of their own.

In contemporary technical writing, the classification often becomes a variation of the two-part division of management and technical readers (Dodge, 1962). Pearsall (1969), for instance, divides audiences into the layman, the executive, the expert, the technician, and the operator. Computer documentation writers frequently distinguish users by their level of experience--whether they are novices or experts--and by their subject-matter specialties--accountants, English professors, or lawyers, for instance.

FINDING: AUDIENCE CLASSIFICATIONS

In terms of my research, I have found that as audience theory predicts, the MicroBook company classifies its readers in two ways: on the basis of their professional background and, second, on the basis of their skill or experience with computers. As a matter of fact, the classification strategy is one of the main techniques the company uses for thinking about its readers.

Based largely on information from marketing, MicroBook assumes that the largest group among its readership is business readers, but that readers with other backgrounds are also likely to use the book--students and at-home users, for instance.

This readership is reflected to some degree by the structure of the organization. The particular group I worked in, for instance, specialized in books that document programs with obvious business applications like data bases, spreadsheets, and word processors. But except for occasional references to the office setting or particular business-related examples such as calculating payrolls, the DOS book contains few overt references to these business readers. Indeed, the chapter I examined is stripped of references to particular contexts. The company hopes that readers will not feel left out or alienated by context-setting references.

The audience classification that MicroBook pays the most attention to is based on the skill level of its readers. For the DOS book I studied, the company assumes that novice, intermediate, and advanced users will purchase the book.

An important implication of the novice-to-expert readership is that MicroBook devised a system within the company to accommodate the interests and needs of the multiple readers. The system is composed of a network of people who each represented the book's readership. The copy editors, all of whom are language experts and have little computer experience, represent the novice to intermediate users. The author and a technical editor, both of whom were hired for their computer expertise, represented the intermediate to advanced users. (Figure 1)

In practice, the author provides material for the book which is in turn read--and edited--by the copy and technical editor. In essence, the MicroBook system creates a model within the company which attempts to mirror needs of the readers who would be MicroBook's customers.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

A second perspective from audience theory often preserves the manager-technician classification but includes the organizational context as an audience concept which writers must consider. James Porter (1986), for instance, investigates how organizational or community values and expectations influence the production of texts. Douglas Park (1986) argues that knowledge of the social situation allows writers to make judgments about how to make texts conform to governing conventions. This organizational perspective is also represented in technical writing by Mathes and Stevenson (1976). They maintain that to write effectively, writers must see themselves as part of the organizational context and then determine how their reports will be used within that context.

FINDING: ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

My second finding is that the audiences for MicroBook publications are not limited to customers but include people within the company as well. As a matter of fact, the internal audiences, which include management as well as the authors and editors, are as influential if not more influential than the external audiences, the people who buy the books. These internal audiences embody the values of the organization.

In practice, there is a "flow of information and influence" which determines the relationship among the internal audiences and between the internal and external audiences. (Figure 2)

Management plays the key role in this system by setting standards and making important decisions concerning the books. Management thus acts as a coordinator or check on the work of the the editors and author. The two key figures in management at MicroBook are the publishing director and editorial director. Both have backgrounds in English or language study and both have fairly well-defined roles within the company, roles which facilitate book production.

The editorial director is charged with maintaining the company style manuals for editors and authors and for training copy editors. He is mainly concerned with making sure that authors and editors follow the company guidelines for terminology, grammar, punctuation, and so on. In short, he represents the conventions of standard written English.

The publishing director, however, is concerned with larger rhetorical issues. He is, for instance, concerned with how the design of the book suits the purpose and audience for the publications. His purview is thus seeing that the level of material, organization, and design of the books match the audiences for which they are intended. He makes his standards

known to authors and especially copy editors through memos and training meetings.

A second function of the publishing director is to interpret and pass down knowledge of the external audiences. This knowledge usually comes from two sources. One is the customer reply cards attached to each MicroBook publication. These cards ask for some demographic information about the audience and requests the user to evaluate or comment on the particular book the card is attached to.

Another source of knowledge is first-hand experience. The publishing director has received formal training in rhetoric, is an author himself, and has done extensive teaching and training. Through these experiences he has gained an understanding of end users' needs and expectations.

As I mentioned a moment ago, the copy editor tends to take on the perspective of novice users and the author and tech editor more advanced users. In other words, these people take on the role of an external audience. They ask themselves as they write or edit some version of the question, "If I were using this book, would it make sense to me?"

But the editors and authors also act as audiences for each other. During the writing and editing process, they query one another in writing when they come across a passage that needs attention from one of the other group members. These queries, which are inserted in the manuscript, are written notes, something like the notes writing teachers insert in students' papers.

The copy editor, for instance, often asks the author for more detail or for clarification of a passage. The author and tech editor, on the other hand, often comment to the copy editor about the technical accuracy of the manuscript and offer explanations in response to the copy editor's queries. In other words, a dialogue is set up which allows the group to learn about each other's needs. In essence, this dialogue is a form of audience analysis.

IMPLICATIONS

My research has turned up other findings, all of which have implications for teaching as well as for industry. I would like to deal with just two of the implications that stem from the findings I have presented today.

First, my research--like the research of Spilka, Huettman, and others who have been examining audience issues in the workplace--suggests that audience constraints on the job are more complicated than technical writing textbooks often let on. Few textbooks, for instance, deal with the interactions of external and internal audiences and how writers should deal with these audiences. Students do need to know about the complexity of such audience constraints, knowledge which further qualitative research can elucidate. Students also need practice in navigating these situations, perhaps by becoming involved in realistic writing situations or in role playing in the classroom.

Second, my research suggests that in industry, writers and

editors of computer documentation need more immediate and more salient information about the external audiences their publications are to reach. It is difficult and expensive to get good information about mass audiences, but there are several techniques being used today which can help. For instance, thinking aloud protocols have been used by Sullivan (1985; 1986) and Dieli (1988) to help chart ways in which writers can revise user documentation.

The findings from any one ethnographic study can not, of course be generalized to other settings or prove or disprove our assumptions about audience. But these findings do offer a vantage point from which to view and examine our understandings of audience and the composing process. Such an examination, I think, can help make us better teachers and out students better writers.

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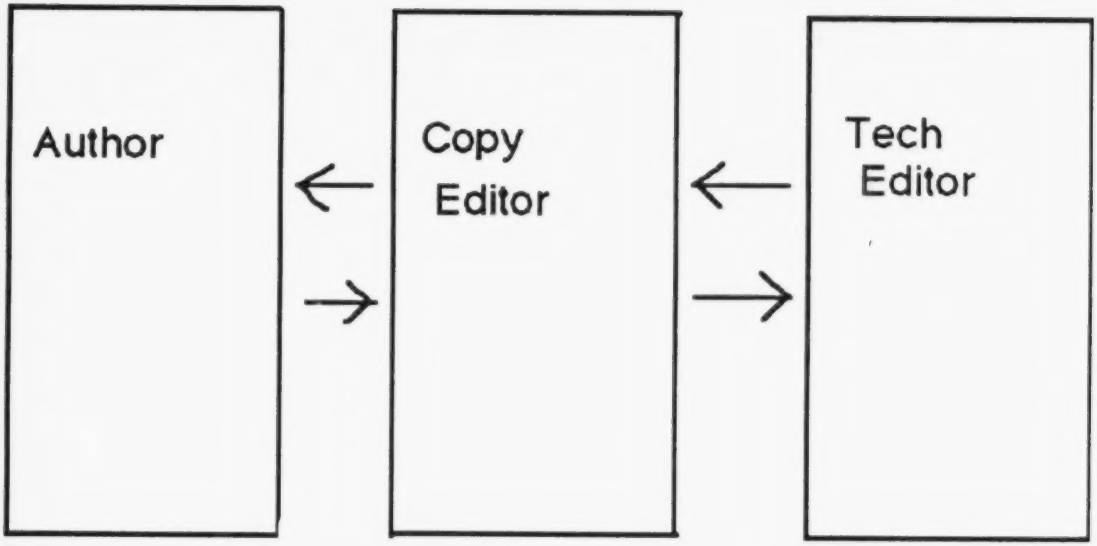
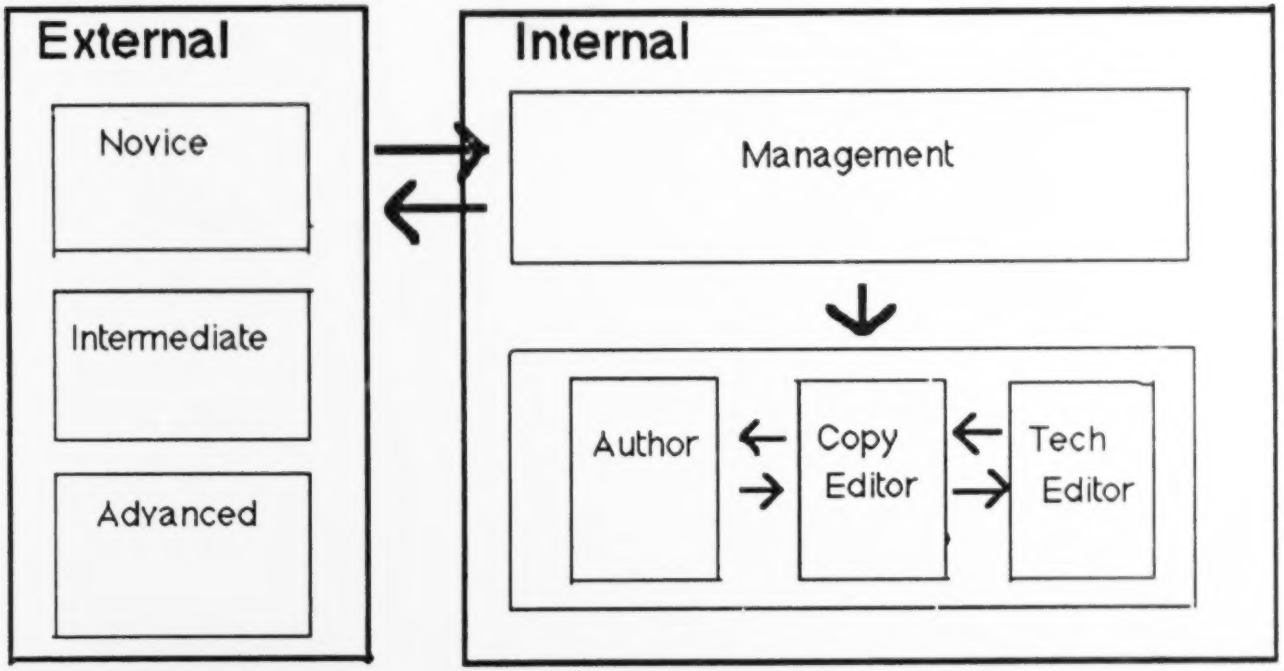


MicroBook Staff

(FIGURE 1)



MicroBook Audiences

(FIGURE 2)